

# UGA football official present as crash investigation unfolded

[Alan Judd](#)



Credit: Jason Getz / Jason.Getz@ajc.com

## [News](#)

2 hours ago

Police chief cleared Bryant Gantt's access to officers at scene of wreck that killed a player, recruiting analyst

A middle-of-the-night telephone call alerted Athens' police chief to a [fatal car crash](#) involving two University of Georgia football players and two recruiters. It wasn't an officer on the scene who notified the chief minutes after the crash, however. It was an employee of

Georgia's football program who frequently intercedes when players run afoul of the law.

Moments later, Athens-Clarke County Police Chief Jerry Saulters relayed the information — and an instruction — to a police dispatcher.

"Bryant Gantt, who is on the coaching staff, is on his way out there," Saulters said about 3:10 a.m. Jan. 15, less than half an hour after the crash. He told the dispatcher to let officers know Gantt was coming, "so they can talk with him and kind of tell him what's going on."

"And he does what, exactly?" the dispatcher asked.

"He takes care of all player relations stuff," Saulters said. "He'll be out so they can talk to him."

Gantt's presence at the scene and his access to police investigators raise questions about the independence of an inquiry into a crash that exposed the [blurred lines](#) between the university's football staff and its football players. The investigation's integrity is particularly important as the university contends with potential liability in the deaths of two young people and injuries to two others.

Exactly what Gantt did and who he talked to at the scene are not clear. Gantt, who earns \$209,000 a year as the football team's director of player support and operations, did not respond to an interview request. Neither the university nor the Athens police answered questions about how Gantt learned of the crash so soon after it occurred, why he communicated directly with the police chief, or whether he spoke with witnesses on the scene.

**"Nobody has influenced the investigation in any way," a spokesman for the Athens police, Lt. Shaun Barnett, said, "and there is no evidence that suggests anyone involved in the crash has been influenced in any way."**

**In a statement, the university described Gantt as "an invaluable resource for our student-athletes in their lives off the field."**

**But his direct line to the chief and his presence during the critical first hours of the crash investigation suggest an inappropriate degree of coziness between the police and the university, the largest and most powerful institution in Athens, said David Harris, a law professor at the University of Pittsburgh who studies police procedure.**

**"He's there to help out and protect players and affiliates of the program in ways that will be of assistance and will protect the program itself," Harris said. "It may be very good for the players involved or the personnel involved, but it may not be good for the public and it may not be good for a clean and untainted investigation."**

**Gantt's involvement, which has not been previously reported, adds a wrinkle to the narrative surrounding the crash, which killed offensive lineman [Devin Willock](#), 20, and recruiting analyst [Chandler LeCroy](#), 24. A second member of the recruiting staff, 26-year-old Tory Bowles, suffered severe injuries. Another player, lineman Warren McClendon, 21, was treated at a hospital and released.**

**The crash occurred about 15 minutes after McClendon and Willock left a downtown Athens [strip club](#) with two women who strongly**

resembled Bowles and LeCroy. Their late-night socializing may have violated a university policy that forbids inappropriate contact between employees and student-athletes.

An initial report by the Athens police blamed the crash on LeCroy, who was speeding in a luxury SUV that the university had rented to transport recruits during that weekend's celebration of Georgia's second consecutive national championship. Neither LeCroy nor Bowles was [authorized to use the SUV](#) after hours, the university said last week. But school officials wouldn't say whether supervisors had known the vehicle had not been returned when the women's duties ended.

The initial police report contained few details about the crash and did not mention Gantt's presence. Nor did the report say why officers at the scene sought information about two other Georgia football players: linebackers Jamon Dumas-Johnson and Smael Mondon.

Gantt's presence and officers' interest in the other players came to light in police dispatch logs and recordings obtained by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution through an open records request. The material provides a real-time record of the crash and its immediate aftermath.

Shortly after Gantt arrived, Deputy Chief Harrison Daniel of the Athens police spoke by telephone to a supervising officer at the scene.

"I was just calling to see if y'all need anything," Daniel said.

"Nah, we're good," the supervisor, Sgt. Robert Schulte, answered.

"Gantt's out here for UGA."

## **'Protected'**

Long before the crash, Gantt had become a familiar figure at police scenes involving Georgia football players.

Gantt, 54, grew up in Athens and lettered as a linebacker at Georgia in 1989 and 1990. He spent 19 years as a process server, investigator and legal assistant for the Athens law firm headed by Ed Tolley, a long-time attorney for the UGA Athletic Association. Gantt was a part-time recruiting assistant for several years before joining the football program full time in 2011 to work on [disciplinary problems](#) among players and other matters.

The same year, Gantt assisted the police in a hostage situation involving a man accused of killing an Athens officer. Gantt contacted the police, saying he knew the suspect in passing, and later helped talk the man into surrendering. The Western Circuit Bar Association presented an award to Gantt for his actions.

When Kirby Smart became the head coach in 2015, he promoted Gantt, eventually increased his salary by fivefold and assigned him to act as what feature articles have described as the team's liaison with law enforcement. In that role, Gantt — referred to by the honorific "coach" even though he is not officially a member of the coaching staff — has repeatedly shown up as players were arrested or booked into jail.

"He's close with some of the cops," former Georgia linebacker Reuben Faloughi told the online sports publication [DawgNation](#), a

product of the Journal-Constitution, in 2016. "You would see Gantt talking with the cops. I think that kind of bridged the gap between the team and the police. ... He kept us accountable, and also made sure we were protected."

Credit: Jason Getz / Jason.Getz@ajc.com

Players knew to call Gantt if they got into trouble.

In March 2017, wide receiver Riley Ridley was a passenger in a car that the Athens police pulled over after its driver nearly caused an accident. A police report said that after officers found a plastic bag that apparently contained marijuana, Ridley "commented that he knew someone that could make the traffic stop go away or go a lot smoother."

"When asked what he meant," an officer wrote, "he asked if I knew 'Gantt' and that he simply could vouch for him that he is a good guy." The driver told an officer that Ridley "could not get in trouble due to his football career."

Officers took both the driver and Ridley into custody. And, at the driver's request, the report said, they called Gantt to pick up the car.

Gantt's assistance to players came under scrutiny later that year after a recruit was arrested for assaulting his girlfriend. Records at the Athens-Clarke County Jail indicated Gantt had posted a \$1,600 bond for D'Antne Demery's release — a potential violation of NCAA rules.

After an inquiry by the Macon Telegraph, the jail [changed its records](#) to say a friend of Demery's family had arranged for his release.

Georgia's athletic director at the time, Greg McGarity, said Gantt's name was listed "in error" and that "UGA staff members have not violated any rules related to this incident."

Georgia revoked Demery's scholarship offer. He pleaded guilty to battery and other charges and was placed on probation.

Two incidents during the 2021 football season illustrate how Gantt works both behind the scenes and in public.

That November, the university's police force obtained an arrest warrant for defensive back [Nyland Green](#), who was accused of possessing a handgun on campus and other offenses. When officers couldn't locate Green, they tried another approach.

"Due to Coach Gantt being aware of this incident," an officer wrote in a report, "I contacted Coach Gantt and he advised that he would inform Green of the warrants and have him take care of them."

Two days later, Green played in Georgia's game against Charleston Southern, despite the outstanding warrant. He turned himself in to the police four days after the game. His case is still pending, according to court records.

Gantt was involved in a more serious case the same week as Green's arrest. He testified at a bond hearing on behalf of linebacker Adam Anderson, who had been jailed on a [rape charge](#) and was under investigation for a second sexual assault.

Anderson "has great character," Gantt told the judge, the Athens Banner-Herald reported at the time. Gantt said he had not heard of the player's mistreating or being violent toward women.

The judge released Anderson on a \$25,000 bond. Anderson, who later was cut from the football team, is awaiting trial.

The university's statement Wednesday on Gantt said he is "a primary point of contact and resource for our student-athletes in matters outside of football."

"He provides outstanding support and education, helping to reinforce our standards and expectations," the statement said. " ... It is not at all surprising that Bryant Gantt was one of the first points of contact following the tragic accident of January 15th and promptly arrived on the scene to provide assistance and support."

## **'Unorthodox'**

On Saturday, Jan. 14, thousands of fans crowded into Georgia's Sanford Stadium to [celebrate](#) something even the Bulldogs' most fervent supporters once thought unachievable: back-to-back national championships. From a cloud of smoke obscuring a door leading to the locker room, a tall figure emerged to lead the team onto the field.

It was Bryant Gantt.

He walked a step ahead of coach Kirby Smart and two state troopers. His eyes scanned the area as he directed Smart onto the field as if he were a member of the coach's security detail.

A little more than 12 hours later, Gantt played a far more somber role at the scene of a violent car crash.

Barnett, the Athens police spokesman, confirmed in an email that

Gantt "called Chief Saulters shortly after the crash and informed him he was headed to the scene."

Gantt arrived at the crash site three minutes after Saulters called into the police dispatcher, records show.

Harris, the University of Pittsburgh law professor, said Saulters' giving Gantt access to investigators was "highly unorthodox."

"Any police officer who investigates crime or even accidents will tell you the last thing you want to have is others — outsiders — questioning witnesses, telling them what to do or whether to talk or how to look at things," Harris said. "Whatever it is, that has the potential for screwing up the investigation and changing, potentially, what police officers will see and hear."

Credit: Natrice Miller / Natrice.Miller@ajc.com

By all accounts, the scene was chaotic. The Ford Expedition that LeCroy was driving had run off the road, snapped two utility poles in two and struck two trees before hitting an apartment building. Power was out, and sparks flew from downed electrical lines. Twenty-three police officers converged on the scene, as onlookers watched from the apartment complex parking lot.

McClendon said Tuesday that he, Bowles, LeCroy and Willock had been headed to a [Waffle House](#) to meet other players. Dispatch logs suggest two other players may have been on the scene after the crash.

Before Gantt arrived, officers had already asked a dispatcher to send them background information on one player, Dumas-Johnson.

They later requested information on Mondon.

The UGA athletic department declined to make the players available for interviews.

The Athens police would not confirm that the players were present or, if they were, whether Gantt spoke to them while the investigation unfolded. The police withheld a list of witnesses when they released the [initial accident report](#). Barnett said the list is part of a continuing investigation.

“We don’t have any additional details or information to release,” he said.

It’s not clear how long Gantt remained at the crash scene as the investigation got under way. But he returned about 8 a.m., according to the dispatch log. By then, the accident investigator was gone.

— *Staff writers Asia Simone Burns, Johnny Edwards and Dylan Jackson and data specialists Stephanie Lamm, Charles Minshew and Jennifer Peebles contributed reporting.*

## **TIMELINE: Dispatch logs**

- **2:45 a.m.**

The first 911 calls about the crash are received by Athens-Clarke County dispatchers.

- **2:51 a.m.**

Dispatch logs indicate that two Athens police officers are in the area of the crash scene.

- **2:55 a.m.**

Dispatch logs indicate an ambulance is at the crash scene.

- **3:09 a.m.**

Athens-Clarke County Police Chief Jerry Saulters calls a dispatcher and says that Bryant Gantt from the UGA football staff is en route to the crash scene.

- **3:13 a.m.**

Dispatch records show that Bryant Gantt is at the crash scene.

- **8:03 a.m.**

Dispatch records show that Bryant Gantt returned to the crash scene, according to an officer on the scene.

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**David Harris, a professor of law at the University of Pittsburgh who studies police procedure and behavior, told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution that the Athens police department offering a football staffer access to officers at the scene of a crash involving football players raises questions about special treatment.**

Here's more from Harris:

**Favoritism and fairness:** "If this were anything but the University of Georgia football program, I just don't see them doing that....It raises questions of efforts to protect the university and the football program in ways that would not be extended to regular folks."

**Transparency:** "Now we know to some extent what happened. But if this police department doesn't start filling in the blanks, the public will, and their assumptions will be that there was some type of favoritism."

**Public trust:** "Public agencies like a police department depend upon the trust of the public if they are to be anything other than simply enforcers using their mandate."

--Asia Simone Burns

Explore [Strip club visit raises questions about fatal UGA crash](#)

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## **About our reporting**

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution has provided extensive coverage of a fatal car crash on Jan. 15 that killed a University of Georgia football player and a recruiting analyst. Stories have reflected on the lives of the victims and have attempted to shine light on circumstances surrounding the crash.

## **About the Author**

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